

# DON'T GIVE UP

FAITH THAT GIVES YOU THE  
CONFIDENCE TO KEEP BELIEVING AND  
THE COURAGE TO KEEP GOING

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## INTRODUCTION

Let's imagine that you and I run into each other at some random everyday location. You can pick it. The waiting area of the auto shop, the departure gate of the airport, or the cereal aisle at the grocery store—where I begin our conversation by telling you the box of Apple Jacks in the cart is for my kids. We've only just met, and already our entire relationship is based on a lie.

In the course of our conversation I ask you how life is going and you give the instinctual response of “Fine,” or “Pretty good,” or “Can't complain.” But I know that's not completely true. There are some things happening in your life that are difficult. Some things you would change if you could. I understand that you don't mention those things because it's not socially acceptable to respond to “How ya doing?” with an honest answer about your pain, struggles, and challenges.

But since this conversation isn't real and we are only imagining, let's imagine that it isn't culturally unacceptable and I really do want to know how you are doing. How would you respond? Instead of asking “How ya doing?” what if I

asked “If there’s one thing you would change in your life, what would it be?” I asked a few thousand people on social media this question and got all kinds of responses.

Their grade school–age child is losing the battle with cancer.

They’re angry with God.

They’ve been married less than two years. They’re ready to call it quits.

She’s been sick for too long, and the doctors have no idea why.

They love their special needs child, and they’re also overwhelmed and discouraged.

Another dud pregnancy test.

Another screaming tantrum directed at the kids.

Another game spent sitting on the bench.

Another visit to the website he knows he must avoid.

She feels invisible to her husband and kids.

His aging father won’t accept Christ.

She sees a future of unending debt.

He can’t climb out of depression.

She can’t climb out of unemployment.

He’s certain no one will ever love him.

I could keep going, but you don’t need me to. Chances are you’ve got your own story. A struggle that is just as real, just as glaring, as any of these. Whatever your story, my words of encouragement to you would probably be the same. They are the same words I need to hear on a regular basis.

*Don’t Give Up.*

I could package it differently: *Keep going. Don't stop. Hang on. Hold fast. Stand firm.*

Hallmark has likely done a few hundred more variations on the theme, with the glossy sunrise and lighthouse images to go with them. Why? Because the need for these simple words of encouragement is universal.

*Don't give up.* Those three words offer more than comfort; they offer courage.

Someone who is dealing with grief needs to hear it differently than someone who is struggling with guilt.

Someone who is walking out needs to hear it differently than someone who is being walked out on.

Someone who is angry needs to hear it differently than someone who is addicted.

Someone who is scared needs to hear it differently than someone who is sick.

Someone who is desperate needs to hear it differently than someone who is indifferent.

As a pastor I've discovered that some variation of "Don't give up" is the message most people need to hear, although I have found that my tone isn't always the same.

Sometimes I say it with a kind of gentle tone. Let's call it the Mister Rogers approach. Sometimes struggling people need to be comforted. That means a warm smile, a soft voice, and an awesome sweater jacket like Mister Rogers wore.

This kind of encouragement to not give up usually includes pats on the back and statements such as:

I'm so sorry for what you're going through.  
You've been through so much. I don't know how you've  
kept going.  
It's not fair, and it's not your fault.  
Things are going to work out. You'll see.

People like to hear things like that. In fact, if you picked up this book because its title is *Don't Give Up*, then chances are these are the things you want me to say to you. But here's what I've realized. Sometimes, when we feel like giving up, what we *want* is Mister Rogers to come knock on our door—but what we *need* is William Wallace.

Who is William Wallace? You saw *Braveheart*, right? That's his story, and I don't remember him wearing any sky-blue sweater jackets or white tennis shoes. He's not a hug-it-out guy, telling you to cheer up. No, this guy paints his face like a hardcore football fan. He grabs you by the shoulder, and he says—even *growls*—stuff like this:

This is not the time to give up and go home!  
It's time to fight!  
Don't you dare back down!  
You're tired. You're discouraged. But don't give up!

When we're right on the edge of quitting, when we're beaten down, when we feel utterly overwhelmed, comfort may sustain us but courage is often what we need to move forward. It gets us taking back the ground we've lost in the battle.

Let's call it by another name: *encouragement*. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines encouragement as “The

action of giving someone support, confidence, or hope,” which is pretty much what we think it means. Until we get to the secondary definition: “Persuasion to do or to continue something.”<sup>1</sup>

That second one has verbs. Now we’re getting somewhere.

Encouragement is a battle cry. It’s a call to move, to act, to advance. What kind of words accomplish that? To encourage means, of course, to give courage—to “speak courage into.” That’s not the same as making someone feel better. It’s not patching up a wound but rather putting a weapon in their hands. It’s giving them a fresh horse and the will to advance.

I don’t know which one you need. The blue sweater guy or the blue face guy. Probably a little bit of both. But I’ve discovered that many of us have some voices of comfort in our lives yet what we really need is a voice of courage. We may feel the need for sympathy when what we really need is strength.

## SECTION 1

# Listen to the Crowd

I coached my son's basketball team. These were sixth and seventh graders. The season ended with a tournament. If we won the first game, we would play in the championship round on the same day.

We won that first game, but it took an overtime performance that exhausted the team. So there we were in the championship game, and you could tell our kids didn't have much gas left in their tanks, physically or emotionally. A couple of them had also been sick during the week, running temperatures, but they weren't about to miss the big game. And one of our guys kept cramping up, his first experience with that. We told him to put in a little more effort and the cramps would go away.

We got to the fourth quarter, and several kids were asking to sit out. But this was it—the final minutes of the season!

A cool plastic trophy was on the line. A trophy that looked identical to the runner-up trophy, and the participation trophy for that matter, but I still wanted it.

I wasn't the only minister coaching. One of the other guys was too, and he was more "ministerial" than me—compassionate, gentle, and gracious. He gathered the team around him during a time-out and said, "Hey, you guys have been doing great today. You've been fighting hard. I know you're tired. You've been giving it everything you've got."

So what were his next words? "You've done so well, take a seat on the bench. Chill and sip some water, guys." Nope. He's not *that* "ministerial."

Instead, he launched into a classic pep talk that, if filmed, would have entered the annals of classic, inspirational talks and been enshrined forever as "The Suck It Up Speech."

It began and ended with those three motivational words. He said something like this: "You guys need to suck it up! Suck. It. Up. You think nobody but you is tired? You've worked too hard to quit now. Get back out there right now and give it every ounce of what you've got! You can rest when the game is over, but *it's not over*. Stop complaining about being tired, suck it up, and let's WIN. THIS. THING."

I was watching the eyes of the boys and saw tiny little flames igniting. Their will to win was heating up. They stormed back on the court like sixth and seventh grade Huns sacking a village, and they won the championship.\*

Those kids wanted recognition because they'd played hard. They needed encouragement to finish what they'd started.

\* I have the plastic trophy to prove it. And a Dairy Queen coupon that has since expired.

The Bible is filled with passages that speak courage into our lives, but one in particular has always held special power for me. I'm talking about the first three verses in Hebrews 12. This passage challenges us not to grow weary or give up.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb. 12:1–3)

We're not certain exactly who wrote Hebrews, but its audience is pretty clear: people who are weary; people who are losing heart. In other words, everybody. On any number of occasions. This writer wants to speak courage into readers' souls.

Let's start at the beginning of verse 1: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . ."

In just a few words, he not only urges us not to give up but points us to a source of motivation, a source of inspiration, and a source of accountability. He calls that last one a "cloud of witnesses." What in the world (or out of it) is that?

The clue is in the word *therefore*, which points us back to the previous chapter. Hebrews 11 is sometimes called "The Faith Hall of Fame." It offers a list of people who faced enormous challenges yet found the faith to keep believing and the courage to keep fighting.

So those are the witnesses. But what's this about a cloud? Two different words are used for "cloud" in the New Testament. One is a single, detached, distinct mass of whiteness you see in the sky. The other—the word used here—is something wider and more powerful. It's an *encompassing* cloud, more like a heavy fog that surrounds us. You look up in the sky and see the first one. You *feel* the second one, around and enveloping you.

The ancient Greeks used that second kind of cloud to describe a crowd, a massive gathering of people. So in Hebrews 12 we have the idea of a huge throng of people all around us, wherever we go.

There's a psychological phenomenon called *pareidolia*, the mind's ability to see an image when there is none. An example is when somebody sees the face of the Virgin Mary on a grilled cheese sandwich.\* The most common pareidolia experience is when we see pictures in the clouds. So when you read about the faith heroes in Hebrews 11, think of them as faces in the cloud of tough issues that make up life.

### **Someone Who Sees**

How does the cloud of witnesses help us to keep going, continue pushing on, and refuse to give up?

Let's look at another word: *witnesses*. A witness could be someone who sees something. An eyewitness observes something happening.

Because of that meaning, some people read Hebrews 12 and think the "cloud of witnesses" is watching in heaven

\* That sandwich sold for \$28,000. Maybe it would have been more if the bread had been organic multigrain.

as we go about our lives. I'm initially skeptical about that, because I understand these past heroes to be living in heaven, a place of perfect peace and joy. I'm not sure they'd be fully experiencing that by spending their time watching us struggle.

On the other hand, that meaning of *witness* could make sense if thought of in a certain way. What if these heroes were caught up in a heavenly kind of joy rather than an earthly one? For example, some scholars argue that the joy of heaven isn't found in avoiding what happens here on earth but in having a full, eternal perspective of what it *means*. They understand that we're moving toward our greatest blessings when we fight through our toughest trials.

So are those heroes sitting in the stands of heaven, watching us run the race? I have to say that's a possible interpretation of this phrase, and it can work. The Living Bible thinks so. It paraphrases Hebrews 12:1 this way:

Since we have such a huge crowd of men of faith watching us from the grandstands . . .

The language may be figurative or literal, but if we define witnesses as "those who see," we're invited to enjoy a powerful, inspiring idea: the applause of history's greatest heroes at the very time we feel the loneliest and most overwhelmed—shouts of encouragement from Jacob and Joseph and Moses and David.\*

Reach for that mental picture the next time you feel discouraged and ready to quit. There are throngs of achievers who have gone before you, felt exactly as you feel, and

\* I imagine Moses as the one yelling, "Suck it up!"

somehow got back in the game and won the trophy. You are anything but alone.

Play that highlight tape found in Hebrews 11. Reread the stories of those heroes and think about how they persevered. What gave them the power to endure? And remember, as you're watching their highlights, they're watching yours.

A friend of mine told me about the moment he almost gave up while running the Derby Marathon in Louisville, Kentucky.\* The course took my friend through a park notorious for its hills. As he was coming out of the park, on the back end of the race, his legs felt dead. He had an overwhelming urge to give in to fatigue—when suddenly the route took him right past one of his friends, standing out on the road to cheer him on. My friend had an immediate awareness of accountability. It wasn't just some unknown spectator watching but someone whose face he recognized and whose voice he knew. He found new energy to finish.

In the moments of life where we feel exhausted and are struggling to keep going, it makes a difference to hear those voices from the Scriptures, a cloud of witnesses who are alive and counting on us.

### **Someone Who Says**

So that's one kind of witness: someone who sees something. But there's another possibility. It also means someone who *says* something. That's what we mean when we speak of someone "bearing witness." Not only did they see it but they

\* I have to tell my friend's story about running a marathon, since I have no marathon stories of my own to tell. It turns out that marathon stories actually require running marathons.

also testify to it. They're witnesses to the truth. Looking at the Hebrews example, this makes sense too. The heroes of faith bear testimony in the pages of Scripture.

But which meaning did the writer intend? Five times this word for *witness* is used in Hebrews 11, and on each occasion the context points to *saying* rather than seeing. Hebrews 11:4 is the key example. The writer is telling us about Abel, the son of Adam and Eve. What got Abel inducted into the Faith Hall of Fame? The offerings he gave to God. Hebrews 11:4 tells us that Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. So it's all about his bearing witness for us; speaking to us, even from beyond the grave.

Abel and all the other heroes continue to tell their stories, across time and eternity, whenever we're tired, weary, and ready to check out. They keep on speaking, and every word they say is about pushing on, getting that victory. It's never, "Hey, you've done great. Nobody's going to blame you for packing it in."

In this first section of this book, "Listen to the Crowd," I want us to get that message and a whole lot more. These witnesses do not just pump their fists and cheer. They have real words of power to speak into our struggles. Sometimes their words may not be the ones we wish for at that moment. But they're always the ones we need.

Get ready to take a stroll through the Hall of Fame. We're going to look at the lives of a few of those who have been uploaded to the cloud of witnesses. I hope you'll be inspired enough to learn even more about each of the other characters, because their messages never grow old.

When you feel like giving up, listen for the crowd.

# 1

## Keep Believing

**H**ave you ever tried to put together a puzzle without the box?

When I was growing up, we would go visit my grandparents. This was before the days of cell phones and iPads, and there was never much to do at their house. I had to annoy my sisters and cousins for entertainment.

Then after a few days, absolutely desperate, I'd get out one of my grandmother's puzzles. The catch: most of her puzzles weren't kept in the box they came in. She had large ziplock bags, each containing a different puzzle.\*

I'd pour hundreds of puzzle pieces out of the bag and onto the floor, and turn each of them over, wondering what kind of picture they might form. Maybe it was a skyline of Chicago, or an old farmhouse in a field, or three snobby cats. I had no idea. Just for the irony, I'd like to think one of the puzzles was a picture of a frustrated grandson trying to put

\* I never asked her why, but I assume it had something to do with the Great Depression. That was her go-to answer for all of our questions.

together a puzzle without the box. Who knows what they pictured, because I never finished a ziplock puzzle. I'd get the edges done, maybe connect a few easy pieces, then I'd get frustrated and zip it back up.

When you have a few pieces but no big picture, it's easy to give up.

The big picture is your guide for the whole process. It shows you where you're going. It assures you that everything interlocks in a way that makes sense.

The writer of Hebrews 11 defines the big picture of the cloud of witnesses as *faith*. Faith is the principle that joins all these various lives. Here's how the writer puts it:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. (Heb. 11:1–2)

Faith is a confidence that keeps believing all the pieces are going to somehow fit together, even when you don't have the big picture to work from. It's believing that God has a purpose, even when there seems to be no reason.

Pastors visit church members who are in the hospital for different reasons. But in reality, you don't want to see me walk into your hospital room. If it's me, that's a sure sign it's something serious. We have staff pastors who make visits, and I'm only called upon when the situation is grave. If you have your tonsils removed, then wake up to find me sitting there, something terrible happened during your tonsillectomy.

But the fact that my visits tend to correspond with tragedy means that I get to see how neatly faith fits into the picture at the very times when life doesn't seem to make sense.

One night I was called to the hospital to visit a young couple. The young lady was going into labor with their first child, whom they'd already named Lilly. Friends and family were there and ready to celebrate. But when the time for delivery came, the nurse couldn't find a heartbeat. The doctor brought the heartbreaking news that Lilly had died and would have to be delivered as a stillborn baby.

I walked into a situation of grief and weeping, and heard cries of despair. I stood with the family, surrounding the bed, to mourn with that mother, until someone pointed me to a room next door. There sat the father in a rocking chair, holding the lifeless body of his baby girl. His tears fell on the pink blanket specially knitted for her.

Sometimes the best thing you can say is nothing at all. You simply sit quietly with those who suffer, and you share their grief. I did that, praying silently for this family. After a few minutes, the father took a deep breath and said something startling: "I guess this is when I find out if I really believe what I say I believe."

Again, all I could do was nod and keep praying. Finally I knelt beside the rocker, placed a hand on his shoulder, and began to pray for him aloud. A few sentences in, I heard singing coming from the other room, where the family and friends surrounded the mother. I broke off my prayer and listened: "How great is our God, sing with me. . . . How great, how great is our God."<sup>1</sup>

They didn't know the verses, so they sang the chorus through again and again, each time a tiny bit louder than the last. Their confidence in those words grew stronger, more insistent. I decided to sneak away and give the family some time together. As I moved down the hall, the singing

continued. Three nurses stood in the hallway listening—silent, respectful, overcome.

There are moments when you find out if you really believe what you say you believe. Faith, at such times, is confidence the picture is there, even though it looks like chaos.

Another college application rejected.

Another job interview with no callback.

Another relationship with no proposal.

Another doctor's appointment with no diagnosis.

Faith carries through.

### **Off the Map**

Abraham is one of the first witnesses in Hebrews 11. God's plan was to build a nation from which the Messiah would eventually be born, to save the world from sin. God chose a man named Abram, who would later be called Abraham, to be the father of this great nation. Abraham's story is recorded for us in the Old Testament, but he's also mentioned some seventy-five times in the New Testament. Here's what we're told about him in Hebrews 11:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (v. 8)

The full story is found in Genesis 12. Abraham is told to leave his homeland, but God doesn't reveal the final destination. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, live in Harran, a city close to the border of what is now Turkey and Syria.

Harran is where they're comfortable. Life there is predictable and safe. Abraham and Sarah have a plan, a big picture of their future—and it's in Harran.

Then, suddenly, God shows up and tells Abraham to move. God's big picture is a whole different landscape, and it's not as pretty. It's actually not a picture at all but a lot of strange pieces yet to come together. This is a plan that requires faith.

Faith for Abraham means more than leaving what he knows; it's about moving away without even knowing the destination. Imagine the weight of that, the courage required. Maybe the conversation between the couple sounded something like this:

“Honey, I just heard from the Lord. He wants us to move.”

“Seriously? We've lived here all our lives! Where are we supposed to go?”

“Well, God didn't mention anything about that. Anyway, the U-Haul is out front, ready to load up.”

“Wait. What you're saying is, we're moving but we don't know where? Why would we do that? Because we're crazy?”

“Because we believe God.”

“Which one?”

Hold on—which one?

Here you have to understand that Abraham didn't have a Sunday school education. He had no sermons to hear, no hymns to sing—he didn't grow up with any knowledge of God whatsoever. There was no Israel, no chosen people; he was part of a pagan family. Joshua 24 tells us that Terah, Abraham's father, was an idol worshiper. Many of us are familiar

with the idea that there is one God who keeps his promises and is a loving Father beyond anything we could imagine. Abraham had never heard the first word about any of that.

Imagine growing up in a home without parents of strong, resilient faith. Maybe that's just what you did.

Consider a child growing up and seeing his parents going through life without a fixed view of how things work; moving from one strategy to another, maybe praying to different gods all the time.

Now God shows up to a grown-up Abraham with a really big ask: *Pack up everything you own and start walking; I'll say when to stop.*

Abraham's response: "So Abram went . . ." (Gen. 12:4).

He has faith to move forward—even if it doesn't make sense. He doesn't decide to quit on the puzzle just because he isn't given the big picture.

We don't like uncertainty; we're taught that it's foolish to walk into the unknown. Therefore we have a tendency to give up if there's no clear map or GPS. But faith that endures has confidence that even when we don't know where we're going, God does.

We do our traveling while trusting in a satellite in the sky that speaks to a computer in our cars. The directions come step by step, turn by turn, with plenty of advance notice. No thinking is required, really. The pleasant voice says, "Turn right here." And that's just the way we like it.

Think about times in your own life when you wanted more details—stress-free movement. Life never works that way, for anyone.

Not during the monthly heartbreaking event for the couple who only ever see the negative symbol at the end of their

pregnancy test. Not for the fully invested employee, working hard for that first big break—only to keep getting pats on the back rather than the promotion she deserves. Not for those in their late thirties, still waiting to find that special someone who never arrives. No satellite relays our next turn in the things that matter most.

Life's detours are undeniably bumpy, confusing, and longer than we anticipate. However, just like actual detours on the road, once we've arrived at our destination, those detours can start to make sense. Or sometimes they don't, but we decide that's all right. Because the joy of finally arriving where we've yearned to be has put the detours in perspective, even if we don't understand them.

## Risky Faith

The courageous faith of Abraham and Sarah requires risk-taking. There are no great stories of a faith that was risk-free. Risk-dodging can be a way of giving up before the journey even begins. Yet there's a hidden irony: playing it safe turns out to be the greatest risk you can take. The lives of the faith heroes tell us that.

Larry Laudan, a philosopher of science, has spent the last decade studying risk management. He writes of how we live in a society so fear-driven that we suffer from what he calls "risk-lock," a condition like gridlock that leaves us unable to do anything or go anywhere. He has concluded that, as much as we try and avoid risks, the truth is that *everything involves risk*.<sup>2</sup> "Risk-free" is a myth.

No matter where you go or how safe you play it, risk is waiting for you. My recliner at home carries certain health

hazards. My remote control has doubled, at times, as a dangerous weapon. Sometimes I sense God calling me out of the house, but reclining and flipping through channels, usually over a bowl of Apple Jacks, keeps me glued to my seat. God has called me to be a husband, father, and pastor, yet I could waste a lot of time vegging out in front of the TV screen. That's a risk I face on a daily basis.

Giving up and giving in to the temptation to check out of my responsibilities is the most dangerous risk of all. Funny how it seems so safe . . .

Abraham planned on a low-risk future—kicking up his feet in Harran; living the way his father did, and his father before him; having no particular god who made demands. But faith doesn't tend to be sedentary. It's always sending us somewhere.

Here are the questions I find myself wrestling with:

Am I following God in a way that requires faith?

Do I do anything at all in my life that requires courage and confidence?

Let me direct those same questions to you. Instead of asking if you have given up or quit, let me ask if you are doing anything in your life that requires courage and confidence. If your answer is yes, then I have a follow-up question for you: Can you tell me a story?

Risking faith, the kind of courageous faith we see in Abraham, always has a story attached to it.

Hebrews 11 helps us understand faith not by giving a long, theological explanation but by giving us names and stories.

Don't tell me you have faith; tell me a story.

A story of faith is almost always a “don’t give up” story of perseverance. A story of pushing through and refusing to put the puzzle away even when the picture isn’t clear. The tendency is to feel sorry for ourselves and to dwell on our unfair circumstances. But faith that doesn’t quit means taking action and moving forward. It’s a determination to act on what needs to happen rather than dwelling on how something happened. Like Abraham’s story, all stories of faith reach an intersection where a decision must be made between staying put and playing it safe or taking a risk and moving forward. Can you tell me a story about a time in your life when you found yourself at the intersection and kept going?

### **Against All Hope**

By the time we get to Genesis 15, a lot of time has passed by, and Abraham and Sarah still haven’t had any children. God has been sketchy in the details, but he was very clear on the children part. The couple wouldn’t forget something like that.

But years pass, and nothing. They must be starting to doubt. Maybe they’ve heard God wrong. Maybe this God forgot the whole thing. But actually, he repeats his promise.

He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” (Gen. 15:5)

It sounds terrific—really it does. But there’s a nagging problem: Abraham and Sarah are an elderly, barren couple. Hebrews 11 tells us Sarah was way “past childbearing age” and Abraham was “as good as dead.” I’m no doctor, but “as

good as dead” doesn’t sound like a great qualification for fathering. Sarah’s biological clock was blinking “12:00, 12:00.”\*

Month after month, year after year, this couple has tried to start a family, and nothing has happened. At some point, enough of nothing causes us to lose hope for some kind of something. And it’s not as if God’s promise ever made sense in the first place. But here’s how Abraham responds to what God promised:

Abram believed the LORD . . . (v. 6)

Believed based on what? Nothing in this world—only faith itself.

For most people, this is where the puzzle pieces would go back in the bag. Even the edge pieces don’t fit. Too much blue sky, not enough of a path. But Abraham keeps believing. Another New Testament passage, Romans 4, explains that it’s this stubborn faith that allows him to persevere and not give up.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (Rom. 4:18–21)

“Against all hope.” That would make a pretty good movie title. When all hope seemed lost, Abraham didn’t give up.

\* VCR reference. Ask your parents.

That phrase also reminds me of my friend Colleen McKain—a modern hero of the faith. She can tell a story of faith that doesn't quit, and I asked her to do just that, in her own words.

Chris and I married young. We both loved Jesus and each other, but after twenty years of marriage, we began having deep conflict. We tried to muddle through. We tried to keep up appearances. But things kept getting worse.

In our twenty-third year, he told me he'd had an affair, which he ended at that time. We moved forward, trying to hold things together for the sake of our family and because it seemed like the "right thing to do." Over the next four years, he had three additional affairs.

When I began to find out about those affairs, I was completely finished with him and our marriage. There was no hope for us. Because I'd had suspicions over the four years, I'd secretly made plans for my future without him. I'd saved money and acquired my own credit.

I was through and I had a reason to be. No one would blame me. In fact, anyone who knew felt sorry for me. Everyone I talked to seemed to agree that the marriage was beyond hope. I felt sure that my life would go on without him in the picture, and honestly, I was glad.

Early in the morning, on the day I found out about the final affair, God showed me a verse: 1 Samuel 12:16. "Now then, stand still and see this great thing the LORD is about to do before your eyes!"

I felt something I didn't even want to feel. I felt *hope*. Over the next few days, this verse kept coming back to mind. I was furious and full of rage toward my husband. But in the middle of the fury, that verse would come to mind. "Stand still and see this great thing the LORD is about to do before your eyes!"

I finally told God I'd watch and see what he might do, though I doubted he'd come through. After all, he hadn't answered my prayers for our marriage up to this point.

I began watching Chris like a hawk, keeping my end of the bargain to "watch what God might do." To my surprise, Chris began changing. Because of our history together, I could tell that these changes were real. I could tell this time was different. I began seeing things in his life that I had prayed over him for many years, and I knew this was only happening by God's intervention. I may have been ready to give up, but God was just getting started.

God gave me the faith to keep believing. My belief wasn't in Chris or myself, but I reached a place where I believed that God was going to save our marriage. Once I really believed that, I was all in.

The healing process was not easy. It included heated conversations, intense counseling, and deep reliance on the Lord. It brought to light things in both of our lives that needed to be addressed. From the world's wisdom and my own perspective, I'd have given up on our marriage. But God had a different plan. I now have a husband with a new heart, and in the process I have been made new too.

I don't know your story. I don't know what you've done or what's been done to you. I don't know what words have been spoken or what kind of betrayal has taken place. There's a lot I don't know, but I do know that God is able to do a great thing before your eyes, so hang on to that hope. Stay the course. Wait and see what he will do. Don't give up.

## **Redefining Faith**

Faith that gives you the confidence to keep believing and the courage to keep going is not faith in life's circumstances; it's faith in God's character.

Sometimes faith does heal. Sometimes it does pay the bills. But sometimes what it gives you instead is something more precious: the strength to get through the day where there is no perfect healing, or when you're not sure how the bills are going to get paid.

Sometimes faith looks like a wife on her knees in a waiting room, praying for her husband who is in surgery for a tumor to be removed. The doctor comes in and says, "There is no tumor. We don't know what happened to it; it's just not there. We can't explain it."

Sometimes that's what faith looks like. But sometimes faith is a wife sitting in a cemetery and watching the casket of her husband being lowered into the ground. That's faith, too, you know. I've seen examples of both, and God was present in each.

Sometimes faith is a high school student who decides to start a Bible study on campus with no idea how it will go over. Incredibly, it just takes off. Wonderful, uplifting things are accomplished, and revival breaks out in the school.

Sometimes faith is a high school student who walks into school with a Bible. But she's mocked and ridiculed, and she spends four years of her life overlooked and misunderstood. That's faith too.

Sometimes faith is walking into the boss's office and telling him you refuse to lie or to mislead a client because of your convictions—and it ends up getting you a promotion. Sometimes the same faith will land you in the unemployment line.

Our faith is in God and the big picture that we won't completely see this side of eternity. It isn't easily—or rarely at all—measured by earthly success, but it's what keeps us aligned with the truth that sings out in our soul.

It's faith that keeps believing, even when the pieces don't seem to fit together.

### **Happily Never After**

For Abraham and Sarah, it actually happens. It seems to take forever, but it happens. A child is born.

Sarah becomes pregnant, non-ticking biological clock and all. Abraham is beaming with pride, though “as good as dead.” They have a baby son by the name of Isaac. They believed and persevered and hung on to their faith for years, and it was hard, but they got their reward. And lived happily ever after.

Until they didn't.

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

(Gen. 22:1–2)

There is no instance in the Bible of God ever requiring a human sacrifice. In fact, in several passages of Deuteronomy, God clearly condemns such practices. So this is off-brand for God. You and I as readers are tipped off about the truth in the first verse: “God tested Abraham.”

But Abraham isn't given that heads-up. God simply tells him to take that son—the deepest, fiercest hope and dream of all his long life, the object of his adoration and Sarah's—and offer him up.

How is Abraham going to react? Here's how the next verse begins:

Early the next morning . . . (v. 3)

No questions, no second-guessing, no objections are recorded. Abraham waits for morning, then heads to Mount Moriah with his son and a sharp knife.

He *has* to have questions; it's basic humanity.

*Why my son? It makes no sense. I'm to be the father of a great nation and you want me to kill my only son? And why all the way to Moriah? What's so significant about that place?*

It will be a long walk, full of dread and the beginnings of grief. Every step offers the temptation, almost unbearable, to turn back. But whatever Abraham's private thoughts, his body acts out his obedience. He takes a few servants with him, and after a few days of travel, they get to Moriah. Abraham says to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you" (v. 5).

Did you catch that? The word *we*? Abraham says to the servants that "we will come back to you." He is obeying God, but it seems that even now, Abraham believes that Isaac will be spared. He's holding on to God's promise, and he keeps right on believing even when the story doesn't make sense. Faith peeks through at us in that verse.

Abraham knows that even though he has the puzzle pieces, he can't see the picture. He finds the courage to keep believing because he has confidence that God *does* have that picture, that he creates beautiful pictures, that he is worthy of trust.

Hebrews explains it this way: “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead” (Heb. 11:19).

That is the kind of faith that keeps us from being discouraged and defeated. When things don’t seem to be going as planned, and everything is falling apart, we have a stance: *God is able to make this work*. He’s able to bring to life what is dead.

The question raised is this: Where is the point at which you would abandon all hope? For Abraham, it was somewhere on the other side of a command to

Give.

Up.

His.

Child.

Think on that . . . Abraham’s limit is undefined. His hope in God knows no bounds. We have to figure maybe there isn’t a limit; maybe it’s possible to have an all-encompassing hope, because if God is powerful enough to raise the dead, what *can’t* he do? And if you believe he is perfectly loving, what *won’t* he do?

God tested to see if Abraham’s red line of despair would be revealed. What would that test show with you? How far would your faith extend?

All-encompassing hope powers a faith that keeps on pushing, never gives up, always believes in God’s intent.

## **The Big Picture**

You probably know what happens next in the story of Abraham and Isaac. They reach the place God has described, and Abraham builds an altar to sacrifice his only son. But just

as he raises his knife, an angel stops him and tells him not to lay a hand on the boy.

Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He offers the ram as a sacrifice on the mountain instead of his son, and he names the place “The LORD Will Provide” (Gen. 22:14).

But even now, Abraham doesn’t see the whole picture. In fact, the bigger picture won’t come into focus for a few thousand years.

See, Abraham now lives in Beersheba, which is a small oasis in the southern desert. He has traveled three days to a place called Moriah. At the time, there isn’t much there. But after a couple thousand years, the story comes to us of another Father who sacrifices his only Son. Only this time, there’s no test. This is not a drill. God gives up his precious, perfect Son because of the precious, imperfect children he loves.

Over the years, a city called Jerusalem has risen nearby. Jesus is crucified on one of the hills once known as Mount Moriah. We don’t know exactly which hill, but I bet we can guess.

The story of Abraham took place a few thousand years before the birth of Christ. We now live a few thousand years on the other side of his birth. And *still* the picture isn’t complete. There are still puzzle pieces that God hasn’t pushed neatly into place yet.

Your story is one of those pieces, so keep believing. Are you a little unsure about that? If the pieces of your life don’t seem as if they could possibly fit into a beautiful picture, Abraham has a message for you from the cloud. It might go something like this: “I get it. Life hasn’t measured up to

your expectations. You're not alone; it's true for everyone—it certainly was for me. I thought there was a plan, and I waited and waited. I got older and older, until Sarah and I were scratching our heads. But I hung on.

“If you're feeling disappointed and disillusioned, keep believing. If you are confused and wondering if you somehow missed God's plan, keep believing. If you have done things your own way and only made things worse, keep believing. There *is* a picture. You can't see it now, but up here in the cloud, we have an incredible view. The picture is worth fitting into, and it's coming together, piece by piece. You're going to like it. That we promise.

“Keep believing! Don't give up!”